



## CHAPTER 9

# Gender Representation in Wales: New Approaches to Candidate Selection in UK's Devolved Legislatures and Beyond

*Diana Stirbu, Jac Larner and Laura McAllister*

Gender is often an overlooked aspect in political and constitutional reform (Brown, Donaghy, Mackay, & Meehan, 2002). The current climate within Western democracies, with high levels of volatility and dissatisfaction with mainstream politics (Mair, 2013; Norris, 2011), has brought about new and often radical parties (Kriesi, 2014; Ramiro, 2016), a revitalisation of smaller parties, as well as a decline of loyalties to centre-ground politics (Jennings, Clarke, Moss, & Stoker, 2017). However, gender is more often than not second order to broader issues driving this new political mobilisation: globalisation, Europeanisation,

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15 austerity, immigration and security. It takes forceful activism within  
16 political parties and beyond to raise the profile of gender in debates and  
17 bring it on the political reform agenda (Karamessini & Rubery, 2017).

18 Nevertheless, constitutional and political reform (either organic or  
19 more revolutionary in nature) represents an opportunity to tackle sys-  
20 temic structural factors affecting the electoral opportunity of women,  
21 whether this be the electoral system or the internal candidate selection  
22 procedures within political parties.

23 The UK is an exemplar of significant democratic flux, where gen-  
24 der and constitutional transformations have been closely intertwined  
25 in recent times. Although gender did not feature directly on the 1997  
26 New Labour's constitutional reform programme, which included devolv-  
27 ing political authority to democratically elected political institutions in  
28 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the debates leading up to devo-  
29 lution, especially in Scotland and to a lesser extent in Wales, were infused  
30 with considerations over the new gender relations within the new politi-  
31 cal spaces (Brown, 1998; Brown et al., 2002; Chaney, 2003; McAllister,  
32 2000). Moreover, as the winning party in UK general elections in  
33 1997 (Labour) pioneered positive action measures in its internal can-  
34 didate selection procedures, this opened new opportunities to advance  
35 the gender equality agenda in Britain. Labour's adoption of All Women  
36 Shortlists (AWS), a form of positive action targeting half of the winnable  
37 seats where candidate shortlists were women only, set an important pre-  
38 cedent and an example for other parties. The combination of the single-  
39 member district majoritarian system used to elect members of the House  
40 of Commons, known as First Past the Post (FPTP), and placing women  
41 in winnable seats as a result of AWS, meant assured success in terms of  
42 gender-balanced electoral outputs for Labour.

43 The devolution process begun in 1997 has led to significant advance-  
44 ments in political representation for women in Scotland and Wales—less so  
45 in Northern Ireland. When the first elections took place to the new institu-  
46 tions in the UK in 1999, the percentage of women elected to the National  
47 Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament reached record highs for  
48 the UK (40% in Wales and 37.2% in Scotland). This propelled the two sub-  
49 national legislatures at the top of the rankings in terms of gender-balanced  
50 parliaments and, to an extent, dwarfed the remarkable achievement of the  
51 Westminster Parliament's House of Commons, where women representa-  
52 tion rose from 9% in 1992 to 18% in 1997—which underlines how far the  
53 UK Parliament has to go to improve its gender balance.



This progress (at Westminster level and, more importantly at subnational level) has been well documented and interpreted by UK gender and electoral scholars, who have largely attributed the success to the progressive influence of the Labour party (Russell, Mackay, & McAllister, 2002), and to Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party, who each adopted positive action measures in their candidate selection for the devolved elections in 1999 in Wales and Scotland (Brown et al., 2002; Mackay & McAllister, 2012). Another explanation has been offered in terms of the opportunities offered by ‘new’ political spaces to do things differently (McAllister & Stirbu, 2007), including taking radical steps towards addressing constitutional barriers to representation (*i.e.* electoral system) and creating distinct institutional conditions for more gender-balanced representation (rules of procedure, institutional culture, etc.).

A more recent constitutional development has been the process of exiting the European Union (EU) following the Brexit vote in June 2016. Against a backdrop of growing nationalist sentiments across England (Henderson et al., 2016; Kenny, 2016) and Scotland (Pattie & Johnston, 2017)—yet with very distinct motivations and aspirations—and a disconnect between mainstream national political parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats) and their traditional voter base, the raise in support for parties such as UKIP and the Greens, for instance, has been somewhat masked by their electoral insignificance at national level (Ford & Goodwin, 2014), which is a direct effect of the electoral system used in the UK. The debates in the lead up to the EU Referendum are, however, a glaring example of marginalising gender, yet with serious implications (Guerrina & Masselot, 2018; Guerrina & Murphy, 2016; Haastrup, Wright, & Guerrina, 2016).

Unlike other Western European democracies, the recent constitutional upheaval in Britain has not resulted in the emergence of new political parties, with the exception of the Women Equality Party, established in 2015 as a result of grassroots activism. It has, however, seen a peak in support for UKIP, a Eurosceptic party founded in 1991, whose two-issue policy platform—UK’s membership to the European Union and immigration—has led it to some significant electoral gains in 2013 local elections (23% vote share), in 2014 European Parliament elections, when it surpassed both Labour and the Conservatives (26.6% vote share), in 2015 General elections (12.6% vote share), and significant in the context of Wales, in 2016 National Assembly elections, when it won 7 out of 60 seats in the Assembly.



In this chapter, we focus on the interplay between exogenous and endogenous factors (to political parties) affecting women representation in Wales. First, we review the impact of the new political and electoral system in post-devolution Wales—conceptualised here as ‘new’ politics underpinned by constitutional and political reform—on women representation. Second, we explore candidate selection procedures within the main three political parties in Wales: Labour, Conservative and Plaid Cymru. We draw on empirical work on UK’s constitutional transformation as well as candidate and electoral data on local, subnational and national elections from 1999 until 2017. Wales was chosen as a case study for two reasons: (1) the sheer constitutional fluidity of the Welsh devolution arrangements within the above-mentioned time frame, and (2) the unique mix of being both a ‘leader’ and a ‘laggard’ in terms of advancements in gender representation at other tiers of governance. This provides context for us to investigate the impact of candidate selection strategies at different electoral levels.

Our findings highlight the importance of constitutional, political as well as cultural factors to improving women’s electoral opportunity structures. This has come about largely through innovative approaches to candidate selection procedures adopted at national and subnational level, which resulted in significant advances in representation of women in UK’s legislatures. Additionally, we highlight the dissonance between ‘old’ and ‘new’ politics and the lack of contagion whereby success at one level cascades to other elected levels.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Constitutional reform can prove essential in questioning the gender relations within political systems. It can represent both the platform and the instrument through which the under-representation of women might be addressed at structural level. Structural factors can act as ‘gates’ to representation prohibiting or facilitating access to political office. In similar fashion, political parties, as principal actors in political recruitment, can act as ‘gatekeepers’; hence, their candidate selection processes are equally significant.

The under-representation of women in politics has been widely addressed in the literature. Distinctions have been made between *descriptive*, *substantive* and *symbolic* representation of women (Krook, 2010; Wängnerud, 2009). With roots in Anne Phillips’ famous *Politics of*



*Presence* (1995), and Pitkin's framework of representation (1967), the descriptive versus substantive representation debate has dominated the field for a number of years. Not surprisingly, the point of departure in many descriptive representation studies is to highlight the variations in representation across countries and time and to find possible explanations. Political recruitment has been central to understanding these variations and Norris and Lovenduski's seminal work on electoral opportunity structure (1993, 1995) essential in conceptualising factors affecting political recruitment as a supply- and demand-side model. Their main contention is that supply factors (such as personal political ambition, motivation, as well as availability of resources, such as time and money) may determine whether women come forward as candidates or not, whilst the demand factors (such as political parties, their candidate selection procedures and their selectorate, the electoral system and sociocultural norms dominating in the society) will act as a further filter on how desirable they ultimately are as candidates (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995).

On the supply side, the focus of scholarship has been on issues such as political ambition (Alen & Cutts, 2018), aversion towards electoral competition (Kanthak & Woon, 2015), access to resources, etc. Interestingly, supply-side explanations are not entirely divorced from structural and demand-side explanations, women candidates' perception of political institutions being a 'gentleman's club' for instance, generating a sense of exclusion and not belonging (Palmieri, 2011).

On the demand side, the concept of electoral opportunity structure has been further developed by Wängnerud (2000), who differentiates between systems and strategy-based models. The systems-based explanatory model places the emphasis on the exogenous (to political parties) factors underpinning the electoral process (*i.e.* the electoral system, the franchise), whereas the strategy-based model focuses on the role of political parties as gatekeepers in the electoral process. The effect of electoral systems on women representation has been widely debated in the literature. Whilst some assert that proportional representation electoral [PR] systems, for instance, increase women's chances in getting elected (McAllister & Studlar, 2002) and mitigate the adverse effect that majoritarian electoral systems have on women and ethnic minorities (Bird, 2003; Ruedin, 2009), other significant contextual and cultural factors come into play (Freidenvall et al., 2006), which explain why for instance the positive correlation between PR and women representation in parliaments seems to be confined more to established Western European



democracies than those in Eastern Europe, many of whom use PR and have poor records of women in elected office (i.e. Romania, Hungary—see Chiva, 2005; Schmidt, 2009).

In fact, cultural and socio-economic explanations to variations in gender representation in politics have dominated the literature, suggesting that societies with a more prevalent gender equality culture offer more opportunities for women to move upwards on the gender equality scale (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Quotas have frequently been suggested and used as a quick fix (at structural level) to problems of under-representation in parliaments and have generally received international backing (Norris & Krook, 2011), but the desirability of quotas has been vastly questioned (Krook, 2010) and in the context of British politics fiercely opposed by some political parties. Gender quotas, voluntary or prescribed, can come in different forms, from candidate quotas to requirements for ordering candidates on lists, to reserved seats (Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform, 2017). On a normative level, Krook and Norris (2014) highlight the need of more holistic approaches that consider the full journey into politics of women, from being eligible to interested individuals to becoming candidates and elected members, thus taking both supply and demand factors into consideration.

Strategy-based explanations focus on the role of political parties as ‘gatekeepers’ in the process of recruitment and selection of candidates. The extent to which parties respond to external pressures or to constitutional change is dependent on internal party organisation and dynamics (Katz & Mair, 1995). When permissive conditions are created at structural level to advance gender representation (i.e. legal system, electoral system), political parties can still act as obstructive, depending on the gender composition of their electorate (i.e. internal candidate selection panels) (Cheng & Tavits, 2011), the level of territorial decentralisation of candidate selection processes (Hopkin & Bradburry, 2006), as well as on their internal culture of inclusion and openness (Bile, 2001). Whilst democratisation of candidate selection has been suggested as improving gender outcome and enhancing inclusivity, scholarship also points to issues of loss of party cohesiveness (Cross, 2008) that may negatively affect centrally imposed positive action measures on gender.

Whilst we know that positive action measures embedded in candidate selection procedures make a difference (Mackay & McAllister, 2012), political parties have been reluctant to embrace positive action in the absence of external stimuli (i.e. financial incentives or civil society



pressures) (Buckley, 2013). This leaves the inter-party competition and the perception of ‘leaders’ and ‘laggards’ in gender representation creating an important dynamic that can act as an external incentive for parties to move from equality rhetoric and discourse to ensuring practical equality guarantees and reforming their candidate selection procedures. Matland and Studlar (1996) frame this as the ‘contagion’ effect and use this to explain some of the advancement in increasing women representation in different contexts. The concept of ‘contagion’ has been further explored in the literature, both in the context of inter-party effect and in terms of voluntary and prescribed positive action effect (Meier, 2004). An important point raised by Davidson-Schmidt (2010) is that the contagion effect of voluntary quotas eventually flattens and more prescribed measures are needed to further increasing gender representation in parliaments.

Candidate selection is a critical element in unpacking the electoral opportunity of women because it takes place at the intersection of the supply and demand spaces (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995) and because it plays on the dynamic between system and strategy-based explanations of political recruitment (Wängnerud, 2009). Hazan and Rahat (2006, 2010) provide an extremely useful framework for evaluating candidate selection from a comparative perspective. The two-dimensional framework distinguishes between methods and consequences of candidate selection. On the one side, methods of selection can be explored by further distinguishing between candidacy rules (inclusive vs. exclusive), the selectorate (which eventually determines who is selected and nominated), the degree of decentralisation and the appointment system. The consequences of candidate selection can also be further unpacked along levels of participation, representation, competitiveness and responsiveness.

Another important consideration, especially given the focus on this chapter, is examining the role of political parties in gender representation, whilst accounting for a multilevel system of democracy. Matland and Studlar (1998) present interesting findings about the Canadian provinces, suggesting that the multi-member electoral system as well as the party has a strong effect on determining the electoral fortunes of women. Comparative work on gender representation in subnational legislatures (Vengroff, Nyiri, & Fugiero, 2003) also suggests that the proportionality of the electoral system, alongside the level of economic development of a country, is the strongest factor in determining the gap in representation between national and subnational levels. Overall, women perform





only marginally better at subnational level, reflecting perhaps the issue of differentiated voting in second-order elections (Clark & Rohrschneider, 2009), although we found no strong evidence in the literature between second-order elections and improved gender outcomes.

## HYPOTHESIS, DATA AND METHODS

This literature is significant in directing our own research. Devolution has altered the political and constitutional context of the UK: there are now four legislatures in the UK, elected via different electoral systems; there is a new level of political representation altogether—subnational—that adds to the multilevel system (local, national and EU). The emergence of this new layer of political representation has been underpinned, not by a creation of new parties, but by an equally important discourse around ‘new politics’ that advocated for more inclusiveness, openness and transparency in the political process. We can therefore test whether these new dynamics, largely driven not only by the Labour party at national and devolved level, but also by two of the regional parties in Wales and Scotland, have had any significant reverberations across the new political spaces created.

We are specifically interested in exploring how political parties have responded to these structural changes and whether they have made a significant contribution to changing the electoral opportunity structures for women. Therefore, we first look at how the constitutional landscape as well the structural level of electoral opportunity has changed as a result of devolution (i.e. electoral franchise, electoral system). Secondly, we review political parties’ candidate selection strategies across all levels (national, regional, local) using Hazan and Rahat’s (2006) framing of selection methods and exploring how inclusive candidacy rules are, who the selectorate is, the level of decentralisation with the party and the specific gender strategies used to select candidates. Thirdly, we compare political parties’ records, first, in putting forward women candidates in elections, as well as in producing women-elected representatives at various levels of government. The focus will be on Wales and the political, constitutional and electoral transformation undergone since the advent of devolution.

The starting point of our argument is that devolution in the UK has improved the demand side of electoral opportunity for women by creating a more permissive and competitive context for parties to experiment





with positive action. We identify the ‘gates’ as the systemic level of the electoral opportunity structure (electoral franchise, electoral system, legal system) and the ‘gatekeepers’ as the political parties and their equality rhetoric and practice (including candidate selection processes).

Therefore, our analysis first maps out the effect of the electoral system post-devolution and, secondly, investigates the equality strategies and electoral performance of three main political parties. We rely on candidate data and election result data published by the Electoral Commission between 2000 and 2017 and on official political parties’ strategies.

## RESULTS

The political context in the UK has seen some important transformations as a result of devolution. One such change was the emergence of new political spaces as a result of the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1999. This in itself created new electoral opportunities for women. In Wales, this new political space, accompanied by a promise of ‘new politics’, benefitted from a certain blank slate, hence offering certain opportunities for gender innovations (McAllister & Stirbu, 2007). The expectation was that the perceived cultural, structural and institutional barriers preventing women to accede to political office at UK level (mainly the electoral system, institutional culture, etc.) will not be replicated in Wales.

### *Opening the ‘Gates’ of Electoral Opportunity Structure for Women*

Significant for the opportunity structure for women is the electoral system and who controls the franchise in the electoral process at various levels of representation (see Table 9.1). The UK’s majoritarian political and FPTP electoral system has been a consistent and resilient feature of the British constitution, despite calls for electoral reform and growing dissatisfaction with the mismatch between the number of votes and the number of seats parties get in the House of Commons (Johnston, 2001). The electoral system tends not only to reward traditional major parties in UK politics—the Conservatives and the Labour Party—but also, in conjunction with the effect of incumbency, to limit the electoral chance of women and ethnic minority candidates (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993).



The newly created democratic spaces in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland feature more pluralistic electoral systems. In Wales, the electoral system combines the traditional single-member FPTP with an element of PR, which was meant to signal the departure from the majoritarian and confrontational Westminster style of politics to something ‘new’, more inclusive (McAllister, 2000). The National Assembly for Wales was set up as a 60-member unicameral assembly with rather limited legislative powers; 40 Assembly Members (AMs) are elected in single-member constituencies via FPTP and a top-up list of 20 members is elected via multi-member regional lists. This suggested an aspiration to deliver more representative results than FPTP, whilst also retaining the constituency-elected representative link regarded as important. However, the AMS has come under criticism in relation to its ability to deliver a truly representative cohort of AMs- the system still overcompensating major parties, especially Labour (Stirbu & McAllister, 2016).

Who controls the electoral franchise at various levels of government is also important as it represents a strong indicator of autonomy and of exogenous structural barriers in changing the electoral opportunity structures for women in a multilevel system. In Wales, the powers to control the electoral system and the electoral franchise for Assembly and local government election were only devolved in 2017 with the Wales Act 2017 commencing in April 2018. Wales already had a good record on gender representation in its national legislature, leading the way amongst all UK legislatures and legislative assembly ever since its establishment. Following the 2016 elections at subnational level, as well the 2017 snap UK general elections, the National Assembly still leads on the representation of women.

Data from national and devolved elections between 1997 until 2017 reveals two facts. First, there is a significant difference in electoral outcomes for women between the UK Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales (see Tables 9.2 and 9.3). The National Assembly for Wales—a key symbol of the ‘new politics’, a new institution, rehearsing a new rhetoric around inclusivity and openness, and elected via a new and different electoral system—has never seen less than 40% women elected, whilst representation of women in the House of Commons, although improving significantly since 1992, still lags behind that in Wales.

There are multiple factors that account for the better records in women representation in the National Assembly as opposed to Westminster Parliament. These have been largely discussed in the literature: the effect of the relative blank slate and the opportunity for gender innovations in

**Table 9.1** Electoral systems and franchise in multilevel UK

<i>Level</i>	<i>Electoral system</i>	<i>Who controls the franchise?</i>	<i>Notes</i>
UK (House of Commons) (650 MPs)	First Past the Post	UK Parliament	A national Referendum on Alternative Vote in 2011 was defeated 68 to 32%
Scotland (129 MSPs)	Additional Member System (FPTP+PR)	Scottish Parliament	56 Single-Member constituency 7 × 8 member regions
Wales (60 AMs)	Additional Member System (FPTP+PR)	UK Parliament (1999–2017). National Assembly since 2017	40 Single-Member constituencies
Northern Ireland (90 member since 2017/108 from 1999 to 2017)	Consociational model based on PR-STV	NI Assembly	5 × 4 member regions
Local Government			
England	FPTP	UK Parliament	
Scotland	STV (since 2007)	Scottish Parliament	
Wales	FPTP	National Assembly (since 2017)	
Northern Ireland	STV	Northern Ireland Assembly	
European Parliament	PR	EP+member state (thresholds)	

**Table 9.2** Percentage of women elected in UK’s legislatures (2016/2017)

<i>National Assembly for Wales</i>	<i>Scottish Parliament</i>	<i>Northern Ireland Assembly</i>	<i>House of Commons</i>
41.7	34.9	27.8	32

Wales (Stirbu & McAllister, 2007), the effect of the electoral system, the space for experimentation and innovation presented by so called ‘second order’ elections, the positive action measures taken by some of the political parties at subnational level (McAllister & Mackay, 2012), the

**Table 9.3** Percentage of women in National Assembly for Wales (1999–2016), UK Parliament and UK Parliament (Welsh Constituencies, 1997–2017)

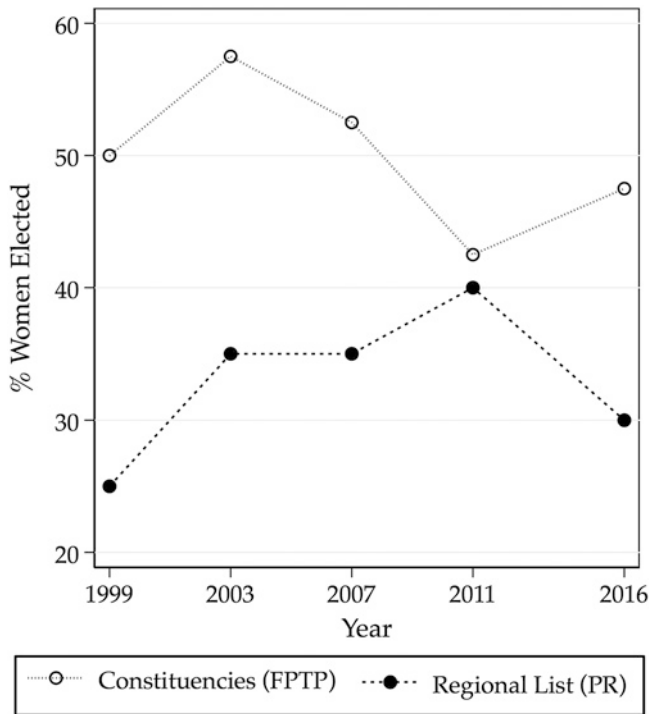
	1999/1997	2003/2001	2007/2005	2011/2010	2016/2015	2017
Wales National Assembly (AMS)	40	50	46.7	41.7	41.7	43.3
UK Parliament (FPTP)	18.2	17.9	19.8	22	29.4	32
UK Parliament (Wales const.) (FPTP)	12.5	10	22.5	17.5	22.5	27.5

more positive institutional culture and discourse instigated by the new institutions in Wales—as well as in Scotland- (Stirbu, 2011), and, more generally, the differentiated voting effect between national and subnational levels (Clark & Rohrschneider, 2009). However, in the Welsh case, explanations regarding the effect of the electoral system on gender representation may seem counterintuitive.

Based on theoretical assumptions that women’s electoral prospects are better under proportional representation systems—at least in Western democracies (Bird, 2003), namely multi-member regional lists, the expectation from the AMS was that it would redress the adverse effect of FPTP on minor parties (Stirbu & McAllister, 2016) as well as on women candidates. The caveat does exist, and empirical evidence from Ireland, for instance, where small Single Transferable Vote seats have penalised women candidates and have not necessarily contributed to enhancing diversity (EPAER, 2017) does suggest that PR is not a panacea for gender representation.

In fact, if we are depicting the electoral fortunes of women in the National Assembly elections under the two electoral systems that make up the AMS, we see that women candidates for the National Assembly elections actually fare better on the constituency vote (FPTP) rather than on the regional lists (PR) (see Fig. 9.1). This is not to diminish the contribution of the PR element of the electoral, but to give a more holistic perspective which also indicates that endogenous factors (i.e. political parties internal gender strategies) are as significant as the exogenous effect of the electoral system.

Electoral data trends also indicate that the two elements of the electoral system tend to converge—by strategically positioning women candidates on top of the regional lists, their electoral fortunes are improved.



**Fig. 9.1** Women electoral fortunes under AMS (Wales)

Secondly, despite progress at subnational level, Wales is consistently and persistently lagging behind the rest of the UK in terms of returning women MPs in the House of Commons (Table 9.3). This is significant, given two additional factors: Labour's prominence in Wales, and their successful application of positive action more widely across the UK.

The possible explanation, explored further in the next section, could be linked with different candidate selection and electoral strategies employed by the Labour Party for general elections in Wales.

Overall, gender and electoral opportunity structures in Wales are closely linked with the ever-changing constitutional context. Following recommendations from an Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform (EPAER) set up in February 2017 by the Presiding Officer of the National Assembly to look into matters related to the size of the Assembly, the electoral system and the electoral franchise, the Assembly passed a motion in February 2018 to start a consultation on

the implementation of the EPAER’s recommendations, which included an increase in the size of the Assembly, changing the electoral system, extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds, and significantly, the introduction of gender quotas (EPAER, 2017). The Welsh Government also announced changes to the electoral system for local government, extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds, following a consultation launched in summer 2017 (Welsh Government Consultation, 2017). The continuing fluid political landscape is likely to present further opportunities to improve the diversity of representation in the Assembly, with gender likely to constitute the most important dimension.

*Political Parties in Wales: The Gatekeepers*

Most political parties operating in Wales have engaged with the gender equality rhetoric, but not all have pursued active promotion of gender balance and not all use the same electoral strategies at different electoral levels. We are interested here in variations in parties’ electoral strategies and in the consequences of this in relation to gender at different levels and focus our attention on: Labour, the Conservatives, Plaid Cymru, and to a more limited extent UKIP.

By far, the Labour party the best record in electing women in the National Assembly since 1999 as depicted in Table 9.4. Plaid Cymru has experienced a downward trend since 2003, when half of its cohort of AMs were women, whilst the Conservative party has only seen more significant progress since 2011. UKIP has only broken through in the Assembly following the 2016 elections, with a record of 7 elected members—all elected on regional lists—2 being women. Following the resignation of one of UKIP’s male AMs, and the automatic nomination of the next candidate on the list to take the vacant seat, a woman, UKIP’s record improved to 43% in 2017.

**Table 9.4** Percentage of women of total party cohort elected in National Assembly elections 1999–2016

	1999	2003	2007	2011	2016
Labour	57	63	62	50	52
Conservatives	0	18	8	29	27
Plaid Cymru	35	50	47	36	33
UKIP	–	–	–	–	29



At national level, the Labour party is rightly been perceived as a pioneer in driving gender equality and in moving from rhetoric to practical gender interventions in their candidate selection procedures. The party introduced AWS for the 1997 UK general elections, despite being found in breach on the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act in 1996 (Norris, 2001). The astounding results of the 1997 general election saw 101 Labour women MPs elected out of the total 120 women MPs elected to the House of Commons that year (HoC, 2016). After the election of New Labour in 1997, the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act was reformed in 2002, allowing parties to use AWS in order to improve the chances of women, thus paving the way for political parties to implement more robust positive action measures in their candidate selection.

The candidate selection process within the Labour Party nationally has traditionally mixed central control and local autonomy and has undergone some important changes since 1997, both national and at subnational level. The focus has been on widening participation in the candidate selection process. Candidacy rules require individuals to have been party members for at least one year before being approved as candidates. Whilst not entirely exclusive, this rule may prevent new party members from standing for elections. One of the most important changes in candidate selection has been a redefinition of the ‘selectorate’ within the Party. Traditionally, candidates have been chosen by local constituencies and approved by a central body, this changing with the introduction of ‘one member one vote policy’, which gives more substantial power to party members. Following the 2010 general elections defeat, say in candidate selection has been further expanded to registered party supporters, in a move which bolstered the grassroots movement in the party (Institute for Government, 2011).

Whilst widening participation in candidate selection has been a feature of internal party transformations, this has been accompanied by the introduction and imposition of a formal candidate selection process, which includes formal application, assessment, long-listing and short-listing of candidates. The process, although normally carried out by local branches is overseen by a representative of the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party. Central party control and imposition also includes requirement for the local candidate selection panels to be gender-balanced (Institute for Government, 2011).

The degree of decentralisation and the party’s general adaptation to devolution has been discussed by the scholarship (Bradbury, 2009;





Hopkin & Bradbury, 2006). At subnational level, the Welsh branch insisted on rebranding as the Welsh Labour despite little divergence in terms of party organisation at subnational initially. However, with the party's strategic leadership devolved to the Welsh Executive Committee and a general policy distancing between Welsh Labour and the national party, famously encapsulated in the promise of 'clear red water' between Cardiff and London by a former Welsh Labour First Minister, the degree of regional autonomy, especially on elections to the National Assembly and the local government, has increased, whilst there is still significant control from the national party in terms of candidate selection and election strategy for Westminster elections (Bradbury, 2009).

In terms of specific gender strategies, Labour's use of AWS in UK general elections<sup>1</sup> made it a leader in pushing for equal representation of women in the UK. Despite the scholarship showing no evidence of an AWS penalty (Cutts & Widdop, 2013), other parties have been reluctant to adopt this form of gender quota and even within the party ranks there are many dissenting voices resisting the central party imposition of AWS.

Wales is a good example to highlight the tensions created by the top-down approach to AWS. For General elections in Welsh constituencies the use of AWS has been rather limited and marred with controversy. Between 1997 and 2015, only eight constituencies put forward AWS. Strong opposition of local branches in Blaenau Gwent in 2005, and again in 2015 in Cynog Valley and Swansea (BBC Wales, 2014) suggests that the equality rhetoric and practice are still far apart in Wales, despite Labour's pioneering role in adopting positive action. AWS for the elections to the National Assembly were approved after heated debates and only with a wafer-thin majority (3%) in 1999. The strategy used by Welsh Labour in 1999 Assembly elections targeted the 40 seats elected FPTP, 'twinning' neighbouring constituencies, with one putting forward a man whilst the other one putting forward a woman. This explains the excellent results of women under FPTP as previously shown in Fig. 9.1.

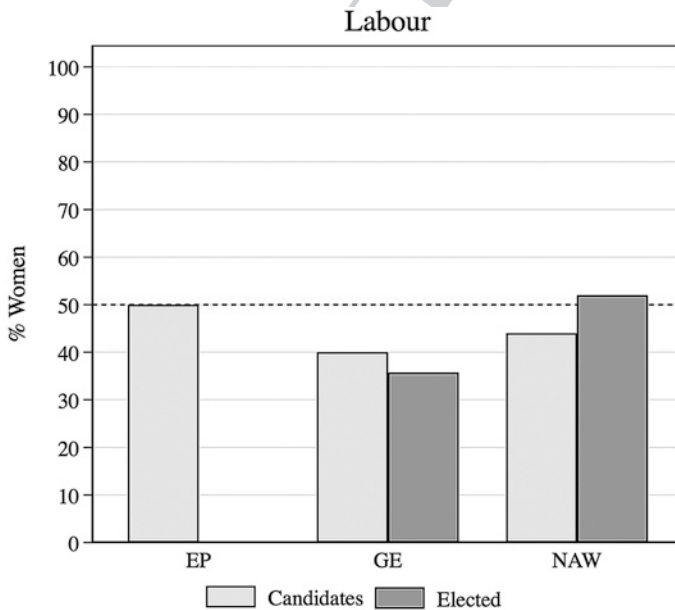
Alongside with embedding positive action in their candidate selection process, the Labour party and its Welsh branch also increased the number of women candidates at every election, at every level (local, subnational, national and European level). In the last round of elections for the European Parliament in 2014, for the House of Commons in 2017, and for the National Assembly for Wales in 2016 women candidates accounted for nearly or more than 40% of their Labour total candidates at all levels (see Fig. 9.2).



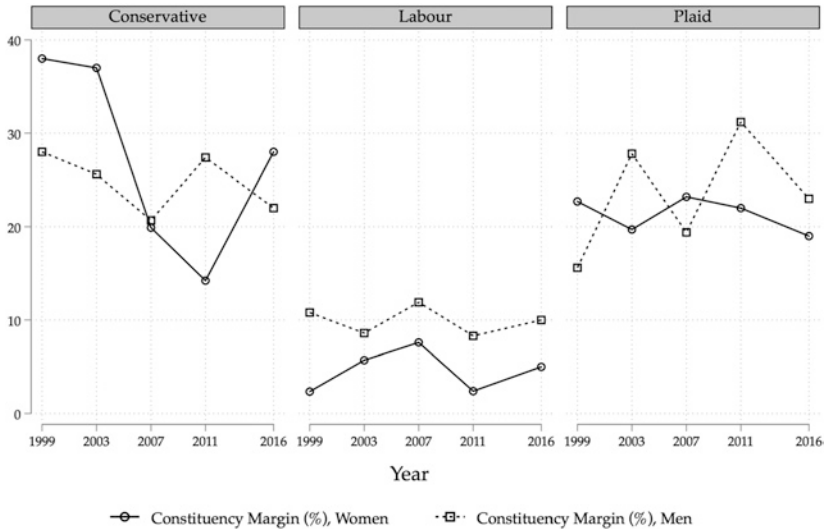
The success of women Labour candidates is strongly linked with seat targeting, seat marginality as Fig. 9.3 reveals. Although no Labour women MEPs were elected from Wales in 2014, there is no indication that women candidates have a worse rate of success than male candidates.

Figure 9.3 explores whether women candidates are placed in more or less competitive constituencies at NAW elections compared to their male counterparts. If placed in less competitive constituencies we would expect the constituency margin (measured here as the difference in vote shares between a given candidate and the winning candidate) to be greater for women than for men. In this regard, there is no clear pattern for two of the parties of interest, the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru. However, the data for Welsh Labour shows a remarkably clear trend: women candidates are consistently placed in more competitive seats than their male counterparts.

At local level, the percentage of women candidates put forward by Labour, as well as of women-elected councillors (see Table 9.5), is improving at a much slower pace than at other levels and slower than in



**Fig. 9.2** Labour women candidates vs elected representatives—last elections



**Fig. 9.3** Constituency margins for women and men in National Assembly Elections 1999–2016

other parts of the UK (Fawcett Society, 2017). This reveals yet another area of disconnect between the ‘new’ politics of devolution, with Labour’s pioneering role in gender equality, and the old majoritarian structures and dynamics at local level (Stirbu, Larner, & McAllister, 2017).

The lack of cascading effect of the progress made at Assembly level to the local level has been linked with various cultural, structural and political barriers hindering women’s entry to local government (Equality & Human Right Commission, 2017; Fawcett Society, 2017), but also with cultural elements underpinning the organisation of local politics in Wales (Stirbu et al., 2017).

The Conservative party has generally been averse to any form of positive action in their candidate selection process. Until 2000, the party engaged little with the equality rhetoric, fielded smaller numbers of women candidates in all elections and returned significantly smaller numbers of women MPs in comparison to Labour. In 2005 General election only 9% of the elected Conservative MPs elected in the House of Commons were women. In Wales, the Conservatives have only started breaking ground since 2010 General elections, when 8 Conservatives MPs

**Table 9.5** Percentage of labour women candidates and women-elected councillors (2008–2017)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Women candidates</i>	<i>Women-elected councillors</i>
2008	27	24
2012	30 (+3)	30 (+6)
2017	35.5 (+5)	32 (+2)

were elected from Wales but none of them were women. The situation at National Assembly level features a similar pattern or under-representation: no Conservative women were elected in 1999, and two were elected in 2003, and just one in 2007. Only since 2011 do we see some improvement both in terms of candidates and women AMs. In 2016 the Conservatives fielded 25% women candidates in the 2016 assembly election, resulting in 27% of their elected members (EPAER, 2017).

The candidate selection process in the Conservative party has traditionally been dominated by informality, the importance of strong personal and political networks, and a relative autonomy of local branches. The process has seen somewhat important transformations over the years and is at present much more formalised and centrally driven. In the past, the parliamentary selection board used to base its selection criteria on strict rules derived from army officers training, raising criticism of institutionalised sexism within the candidate selection process (Institute for Government, 2011). Since 2001, all candidates on the centrally approved list, as well as other nomination from local branches have to go through the Parliamentary Assessment Board. Candidacy rules are more flexible than for the Labour party, as a candidate that reaches the assessment board stage needs to have been a party member for only three months (Conservative Party, 2018).

There has also been some experimentation with the nature of the selectorate and the process of approving candidates, namely changes to the selection committees since 2005 have seen more central control imposed in the process, but also some experimentation with open (and postal) primaries between 2006 and 2010 for general elections (Institute for Government, 2011).

The issue of gender and candidate selection was addressed at the Party conference in 2000, when questions were raised as to why in the 19 winnable seats at the time not a single woman was selected (BBC News,



2000). Whilst the party leadership had expressed its opposition to positive action measures, other strategies were put in place. The introduction of the ‘A List’, a list of preferred women and black and ethnic minority candidates, was meant to increase the supply of these underrepresented groups. To support this, a more informal network, the ‘Women2Win’ campaign, was launched by two leading Conservative women and focused on mentoring, support and on lobbying to place women in winnable seats as a means of addressing the poor gender record in the party (Women2Win, 2018). The strategy has also been accompanied by an increase in number of women candidates (see Fig. 9.4). In 2017 General elections the conservatives fielded 184 women candidates, making up 29% of their candidate cohort. Whilst this is important progress for the party, it was still lagging behind Labor (41%), the Green Party (35%) and the Scottish National Party (34%) in 2017 elections (HoC 2017). In Wales, although the number of women candidates nearly doubled from 2001 (18%) to 2010 (35%), and the number of Conservative MPs elected from Wales in the House of Commons has reached a record high in 2015–2011 Conservative Welsh MPs—there remains no single woman MP elected from the party.

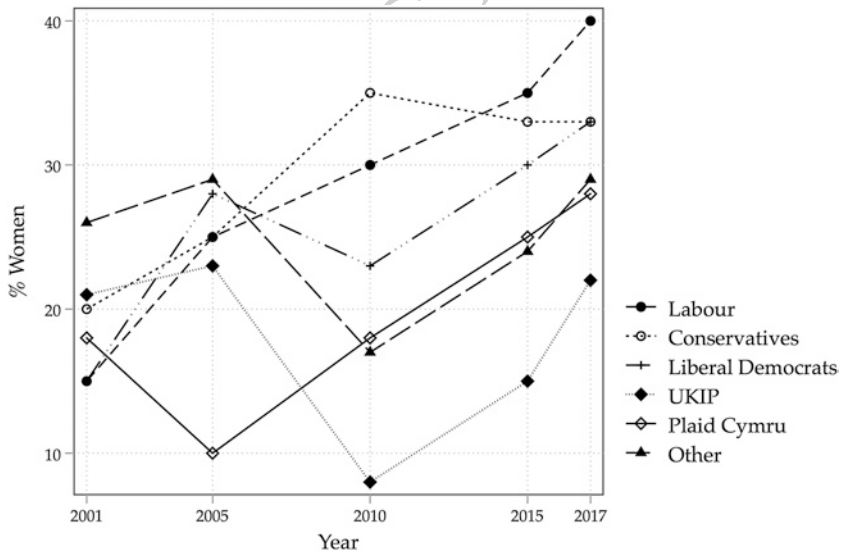


Fig. 9.4 Women candidates by party, general elections 2001–2017



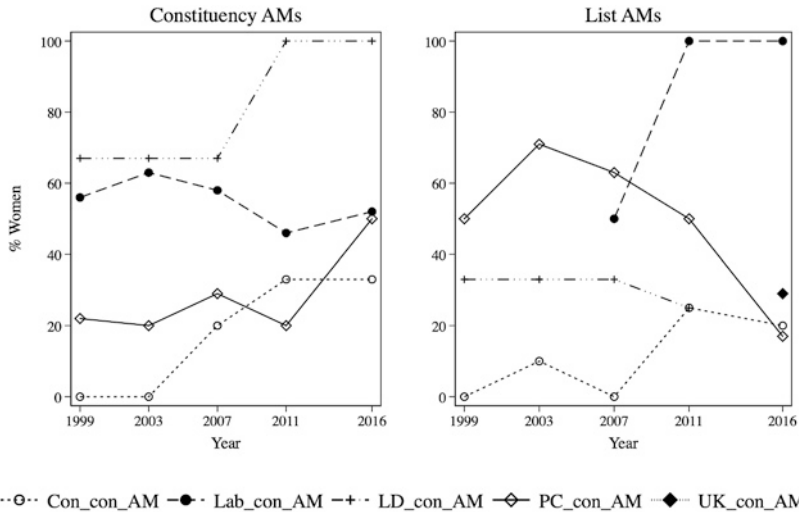
Conservative women in Wales fair slightly better at other levels of government. The Welsh Conservatives have adapted well to devolution and have been reaping the rewards of a more pluralistic electoral system. In 1999, out of the 9 seats won, 8 were won on the regional list vote, whilst in 2003, out of the 11 seats, 10 were regional seats. Yet the number of women remained pitiful. As the party's confidence grew within the devolved context it also started targeting and winning seats in the Constituency vote, the latest election, in 2016, awarding the Welsh Conservatives with 11 seats (6 won on the constituency vote and 5 on the regional list votes). Three out of the 11 Conservative AMs are currently women.

The level of decentralisation with the party remains relatively low and central imposition of candidates for general election has remained largely unopposed, exception being the upset caused to the Bridgend branch by the central imposition of Conservative candidate Karen Robson, in the 2017.

Whilst the Welsh Conservative party remains a 'laggard' in returning gender-balanced cohorts to the Assembly, our analysis shows some progress has been made since 2007, when the percentage of Conservative women elected rose to double digits and passed the 20% mark.

Plaid Cymru has also been instrumental in the successful descriptive representation of women, but has shown very slow progress at UK and local level elections. Until 2015, Plaid had not elected a single women MP in the House of Commons and its poor record in fielding women candidates for the general elections has been eclipsed only by UKIP in recent times. Central to Plaid's candidate selection strategy for the Assembly elections has been targeting the PR element of the electoral system in Wales, using 'zipping' of candidates, and placing women in the first and usually third position on the regional lists for the year 1999. In 2003, it placed women within the first two spaces of each regional list (EPAER, 2017). Between 1999 and 2007, we see a concentration of Plaid's women candidates on the lists (above 50%), whilst the percentage of women candidates on the constituency list is significantly lower, hovering around 20% (Fig. 9.5).

In terms of ensuring gender-balanced teams in the Assembly, the strategy paid off—in 1999, Plaid Cymru's list vote produced a 50–50 distribution of regional seats (PR) between their regional male and female Assembly Members. In 2003 and in 2007, 71% and 63% of their regional AMs were women. However, as the party started picking up



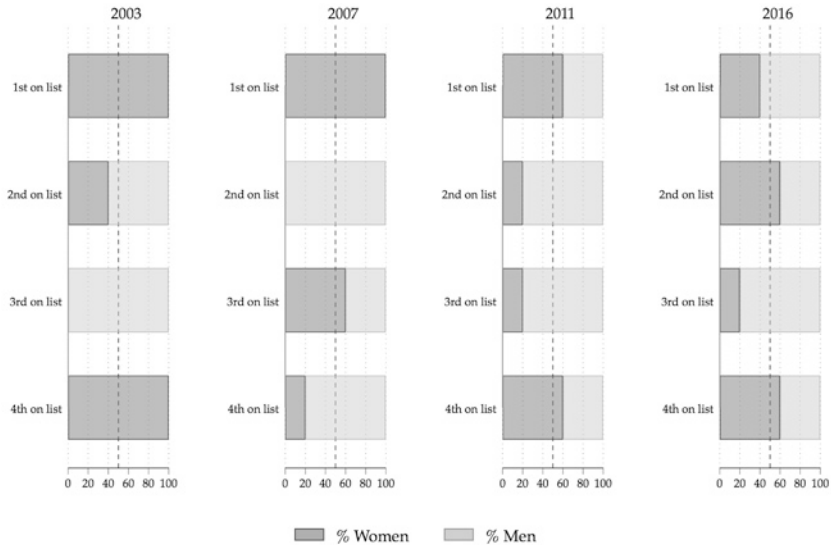
**Fig. 9.5** Constituency and list candidates, National Assembly for Wales elections (1999–2016)

constituency seats from 2007, the seats secured through the regional lists has declined. Moreover, with a significant slump in 2011, and the increased competition of UKIP in 2016, Plaid has moved away from the positive action measures instituted in 1999 (targeting the regional seats had become rather ineffective anyway). This saw less women placed on top of the regional lists (as represented in Fig. 9.6) and more on second and third position. The party's revised strategy for 2016 Assembly elections allowed male candidates to places top of the regional list only if the second place was taken by a woman candidates, whilst the reverse would not apply—if a woman was placed top of the regional list, another woman could potentially be selected in second place (EPAER, 2017).

Plaid has struggled to make significant progress in electing women in local elections too—in the last decade, the percentage of women candidates fielded has increased by merely 3.2%, from 26% in 2008 to 29.20% in 2017, whilst, remarkably, the percentage of elected women councillors has decreased from 27% in 2008 to 26% in 2017 (Stirbu et al., 2017).

UKIP has been a relatively new, yet cataclysmic and frugal feature in Welsh politics. Its electoral achievements in the Assembly 2016 general elections, has been followed by a significant drop in support at local





**Fig. 9.6** The positioning of women candidates on lists—Plaid Cymru National Assembly elections (2003–2016)

level, UKIP winning no councils or seats in 2017 Local Elections. This drop in support has later been confirmed in the 2017 general elections, where the party lost 11.6% of its vote share in Wales, currently at 2%. Despite UKIP's Assembly AMs team being 29% women in 2016, it is difficult to talk about a gender strategy within a party that has not yet embraced the gender rhetoric.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our discussion has explored how the electoral opportunities for women can be transformed by significant constitutional change such as devolution in Wales. Wales was used as a case study as it is an exemplar of recent continuous constitutional fluidity and also because it presents us with a paradoxical contrast in the electoral fortunes of women at various levels of representation there. The new political space created by the National Assembly for Wales presented an opportunity for change: a new electoral system and a degree of experimentation with internal candidate selection especially by two of the main political parties in Wales (Labour and Plaid).



This was backed with a strong rhetoric around gender representation in politics. However, the achievements at subnational level of Wales' three main political parties have not cascaded through to the national and local levels, failing to live up to rather lofty expectations.

Central to our analysis have been theoretical assumptions in relation to structural and political factors that improve the electoral opportunity structures for women: the electoral system, the political context, as well as the role of the political parties in strategising gender equality. Our analysis has focused exclusively on the demand side of the political recruitment model (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995) investigating the extent to which devolution created an improved electoral context for women and whether this context has been sufficiently exploited by political parties to experiment with more inclusive candidate selection procedure and embed positive action in their electoral strategies.

The main findings of our analysis are fourfold. First, constitutional reform has altered the political and electoral context in the UK creating a new level of democratically elected politics, which in turn opened up new opportunities for women to seek political office (in itself a positive effect). It also created a more pluralistic political space, the new democratically elected institutions promoting rhetoric of inclusiveness and instituting practices meant to eliminate institutional barriers for women to accede to political office—another positive change. Other system changes introduced (in Scotland and Wales) were new more proportional electoral systems.

Secondly, the dynamic created by the pioneering role of the Labour party and other parties has had positive effects on women representation, instigating other parties to either adopt positive action measures (Plaid) or review their candidate selection processes (Conservatives). Labour used AWS at all levels, whilst in Wales, Plaid Cymru focused its positive action on the PR element in the electoral system, zipping candidates with women on top of the regional lists.

Thirdly, despite the new opportunities created by devolution, and the progress made at subnational level, there has been no real contagion with progress made at other elected levels much slower. Of the three parties investigated, two (Conservatives and Plaid) show particularly poor records in terms of fielding women candidates in general and local elections. Whilst all three main parties developed electoral strategies to improve the gender representation of their elected representatives, these strategies were not uniformly applied across all levels of government nor geographically.



Fourthly, despite clear progress made, questions remain about the sustainability of this gender progress. In Wales, this was especially pronounced as it has been disproportionately linked to just one party's electoral fortunes—when Labour does well in elections, women do well. Experimentation with candidate selection procedures has not been as revolutionary and as contagious as expected, yet it has been necessary for advancing the gender agenda.

Whilst parties have been described as the principal gatekeepers in gender representation, our findings highlight the importance of both endogenous and exogenous factors in improving the electoral outcomes of women. Strategy-based explanations help explain the significant progress by the Labour party nationally and at National Assembly level. However, closer analysis and breaking down of Labour's electoral data in Wales (for general elections) as well as at local level reveals further deeply cultural and institutional barriers for women. The exogenous factors explored, mainly structural—electoral system and franchise, show that the electoral opportunity of women can be widened through structural and electoral reform, however, that alone does not necessarily solve the issue of under-representation.

Addressing cultural factors and diversifying pathways into politics for women through innovative approaches to candidate selection procedures is equally important. We argue that, although the incipient 'new' politics brought about by constitutional change has changed significantly the electoral opportunity structures for women at subnational level, there has been little cascade effect at other levels of government, where progress has been slow or stagnating. This dissonance between the old and 'new' politics suggests that it takes action aimed at both the gatekeepers and the gates, parties and systems, to support this. Initial evidence from Wales suggests that permissive or enabling opportunities for political parties to promote more female candidates will only achieve so much and is likely to be temporary or unstable. Without prescriptive or system based interventions (especially quotas), it is hard to make gender balance both a reality and permanent or lasting.

## NOTE

1. In 2001, the AWS was not used, but the Labour party still returned a significant number (95) of women MPs in the House of Commons.



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